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Commentary: 1998 Spring Commencement Speech

Martha Frisby Rasin

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1998 SPRING COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

by The Honorable Martha F. Rasin

Good afternoon to all of you who have come to this special event, and in particular, to graduates and families of graduates.

Being asked to give the commencement address at this law school and to receive an honorary degree is truly one of the highlights of my career. There is nothing in my professional life that has brought me more pride than *this* opportunity to stand on *this* stage where I received my law degree, to receive an honorary degree, and to address this audience.

When I was preparing to speak to you today, I tried to remember the speakers at the commencements in my own life. I thought back to my high school graduation, to my college graduation and, indeed, to my graduation from this law school, searching for guidance and inspiration -- and I was absolutely unable to remember anybody who ever spoke at one of my commencements. This was disturbing. I mentioned it to a few of my friends. That's when I began to think I was pretty normal, because not one of my friends could remember their own commencement speakers. Then, to confirm my suspicions, I read in *USA Today* this week that 70% of my peers can't remember their commencement speakers. That tells me it's not a "forgetting" thing -- it's a "wasn't paying attention" thing. That's even worse.

That started me wondering whether it really *is* an honor, after all, to be a commencement speaker, to be asked to go down in history among the unremembered. To join the ranks of the fuzzy nameless. "Judge Rasin, wouldn't you like to come to Baltimore on Sunday, May 24th and give a speech that absolutely no one will remember?" Then, for a moment I thought: there may be a bright side to this. I don't have to write a speech. I can just use the one Judge Bell gave last year. But then I thought better of that, and chose a different strategy.

So, as long as I am going to have this great honor, and as long as it's a pretty safe bet that more than half of you will have absolutely no idea tomorrow who spoke at your law school graduation today, I thought I would try something to increase the chances of your remembering me. I went to the store and bought all of the little boxes of raisins I could find, and here they are.

[Tosses boxes of raisins into the audience.]

This is just a little souvenir for you to take away with you today, along with your diploma. Then, when you get home, you can look in one hand and you'll know you graduated. Look in the other, and you'll know who the commencement speaker was. Just don't get mixed up and have the raisin box framed.

Of course, my friends who couldn't remember their commencement speakers were hasty to add, "Oh, it isn't *who* gives the speech, it's what you *say*." Of course that's true, and so I am going to try to say something meaningful. I realize, however, that today your inability to remember is exceeded only by your inability to concentrate, and so I'm going to try to make it real simple. After all, you're going to have to keep it in your head because your hands will be full. Diploma in one, raisins in the other. It's very simple, but very important. I want to give you a piece of advice for you to think about as you spend your last moments as students in law school, and before you cease to be students and start to be lawyers. One little piece of advice.

Conjure up the image of a relay runner. He's standing at his position on the track. He watches the race start and the first runner takes off with the red baton clenched tightly in his fist. He watches the first runner pass the baton to the second, and then he sees the second runner coming toward him. He stays in place until the precise moment when he receives the baton and then he takes off at breakneck speed.

Imagine that relay runner is you here today. Instead of a baton, you will receive a diploma. From this day forward, you are off and running out in the world, using that diploma and all it represents to take you through a legal career.

The runner in my analogy wasn't born standing on the track that day. He was the product of a childhood, a family, a community, and a lot of training and hard work. It was *that* about him -- who he was before he received the baton -- that determined what happened. The baton didn't determine whether he won or lost the race. It was the person he was when the baton came into his hand that decided the outcome.

It's the same with you. You will not be transformed into someone new when you leave the stage today with your diploma. You will be the same person you were when you got here. The same person you were when you went to bed last night; when you entered law school; when you made some of the terrible errors and misjudgments of youth; when you were jilted by a first love; when you named your puppy; when you made your family proud.

This diploma won't change who you are. Your name isn't replaced by the initials "J.D." -- the "J.D." is simply added to who you already are.

So, now you're saying, "How obvious. Does she really think she is telling me something I don't already know?" Don't underestimate me. I know that you have been fighting a personality transplant ever since you got here. Like a snake in summer, you have been trying to shed the skin of who you used to be, and you have wanted to emerge as someone new: THE LAWYER. I speak from experience. I *know* you. I *taught legal writing here*. I know that most law students are determined to undergo some sort of metamorphosis from the first minute. You come to law school as a perfectly normal human being and then you start writing sentences like: "The aforementioned plaintiff proceeded to prosecute the various remedies afforded by agent for the hereinafter co-conspirators." *Whoever* wrote like that before they got to law school?

So, now you're a person *and* a lawyer. What I want to know is: who is in charge? Is it the runner or is it the baton? Is it the person or the diploma? Is it who you are deep down inside, or is it some turned-out widget in a dark blue suit? You better think about it because there are some important decisions to be made.

Most of you have a job now or will have one soon. Odds are that the job you have lined up now is not where you will be in five or ten years. Career choices will come along over and over in the ensuing decades. When they do, who will make the decisions? The lawyer or you?

So -- here it comes -- my message to you today is: *You should make your career choices based on who you were before you entered law school, not what you were when you got out.*

When it's time to move on from the first job, should you choose your next job based on money, power, prestige? You think I'm going to say "no." But my answer is "maybe." That's because it's okay if it's who you are. Some of you came into law school with those priorities and values. You would use these values to make life choices whether you were a lawyer, dentist, or an auto mechanic. You *should* base your career choices on these things if that's who you are, because that is the career choice that will make you happy. As the saleslady will always tell you when you try on something: "It's *you*."

But there are those among you who may be tempted to go for the power, the money, and the prestige because you think that is what lawyers are supposed to do; or, even worse, you think that is what others think you, as a lawyer, are supposed to do. You may set aside the person you really are, the values you had long before you ever heard of law school, and be tempted to go to "success." *Don't let that happen.* Why? Because you will not be happy. Unhappy people make unhappy lawyers. Unhappy lawyers make terrible lawyers.

The career choices you make over the next ten years should be motivated by the values and dreams instilled in you by your families and teachers, by your own inner compass. Don't do the coat and tie

thing if it makes you miserable. Don't be a criminal defense attorney if it makes you feel uncomfortable. Don't take on administrative responsibilities if what you really like is being in the trenches. Don't be a judge if you can't sit still. Don't practice in Maryland if you would rather take a job on an Indian reservation in Arizona. Don't set yourself up for the partner track in a big firm if you really want to spend a lot of time being a mother or father. There is nothing wrong with the choices you reject. They aren't *bad* choices, but they are *wrong* choices. And if you make the wrong career choices, even if they look conventional and tempting, even if others think you should, you will be one unhappy lawyer, and you won't be a good lawyer.

You are a human being who happens to be a lawyer, not a lawyer who used to be a human being. And, as with all human beings, if you want to be truly happy, let your inner voice, your gut, your heart, lead. Let the human being make the choices, and the good lawyer, the happy lawyer, and the happy human being, won't be far behind.

Thank you.

About the Speaker: The Honorable Martha F. Rasin is currently Chief Judge of the Maryland District Court. This commencement address was given to the University of Baltimore School of Law Graduates on May 24, 1998. Please see the *Forum Faces* section of this issue for a more in-depth biography of Judge Rasin.